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55th Avenue best path for South Mtn. Freeway

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Just like an annoying relative, the proposed South Mountain Freeway keeps knocking at the Arizona Department of Transportation's door. It has been two decades in the planning, 18 years on the map, yet the actual route remains uncertain.

For the past several months, there has been much consternation among Ahwatukee residents about running the freeway along Pecos Road, the southern edge of Ahwatukee Foothills. For the time being, ADOT has tabled that controversy.

Now, its focus is on where to run the western half of the loop.

As early as next week, ADOT will decide where to hook up the South Mountain leg of Loop 202 to Interstate 10 in the West Valley.

It's a decision that was made once, nearly 20 years ago.

In 1988, the Maricopa Association of Governments approved a 55th Avenue alignment routing south from Interstate 10 to the edge of the Gila River Reservation, then curving east around South Mountain Park and Ahwatukee Foothills to link with I-10 at Pecos Road.

But when the freeway leg went unfunded in the 1990s due to lower-than-anticipated sales-tax revenues, ADOT dropped back to focus on freeway lanes and asphalt it could lay.

Now, with funding available and after five years of what was expected to be a three-year environmental impact study, it is past time to start making decisions.

The three possibilities for the western connection are the once-approved 55th Avenue alignment, a 71st Avenue alignment that no one seems serious about, and a 99th Avenue alignment, which would link up to I-10 at the juncture of the Loop 101.

On paper, the 99th Avenue option looks nice and tidy. But a tour of that area shows a ground-level reality fraught with bad consequences.

The 99th Avenue option would run the freeway through Tolleson, a small city that already has I-10 running along its northern crest and several years ago forfeited 35 additional acres for retention basins at Loop 101.

In short, Tolleson has done its part for the regional good. It would be wrong to ask the city to give up another swath of land for Loop 202.

Among the arguments against putting a freeway through Tolleson are that it would divide a largely Hispanic community, separate grandparents from grandkids and culturally split the city.

As important as these arguments are, there is an even more important factor: The city's economic survival.

The 99th Avenue alignment would take out Tolleson's planned commercial corridor,

depleting the city's chance at revenues to care for its residents.

Beyond that, it would destroy existing businesses that make Tolleson an employment hub in the West Valley. Holsum Bakery, Bay State Milling, Mesa Cold Storage, Reckitt Benckiser and Freightliner truck sales are among the businesses that would be razed.

Tolleson High School District Office, still under construction, would be gone. An upscale strip mall anchored by World Gym and 20 other stores under construction would disappear. And the crux of it is, there is nowhere else for the city to move these businesses.

Tolleson is a city that is smaller than its history, geographically smaller than its heart. Before Phoenix and Avondale annexed much of its land, the community was a huge vegetable producer. Today, with only its tiny 6 square miles left, it brings in three times its population every day for jobs.

Where will those people work when the businesses are razed for a freeway?

Contrast that scenario with the 55th Avenue corridor, where Phoenix has planned for 18 years to accommodate a freeway.

And, though cost is not the only consideration, it should be noted that the 55th Avenue alignment is expected to cost \$574 million less than the 99th Avenue alternative. A half-billion dollars is a significant savings.

Phoenix and several other West Valley cities have said 55th Avenue is the best choice. We agree. It makes financial, political and geographic sense - a rare combination.

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